

# China slows GMO rice plan as concerns mount

By Nao Nakanishi

HONG KONG, Nov 22 (Reuters) - China is applying the brakes to its plan to produce the world's first genetically modified rice for human consumption as concerns mount over safety, especially with reports that illegal transgenic rice is already being sold in some provinces.

Scientists and activists say that China's biosafety committee is unlikely to reach a consensus at a meeting this week on commercialisation of genetically modified, or GMO, rice for the world's biggest producer and consumer of the grain.

The government has added more food and environment safety experts to the committee, which is to examine and make recommendation to Beijing on four varieties of insect or disease resistant GMO rice varieties in the pipeline.

"I don't think they'll come to a consensus. There will be different opinions," Angus Lam, a campaigner from Greenpeace in China, told Reuters. "There has been some setback for GMO rice. It's not moving as fast as we expected."

Early this year China, already the leading producer of GMO cotton, looked set to approve commercialisation of a GMO rice, which would lead to the release of the world's first major transgenic crop for direct human consumption.

Yet so far, Beijing has not given the green light to the disease resistant Xa21 rice, recommended by the committee last December. Its added gene is derived from a wild rice, which some said should help convince sceptics of its safety.

"Last year the committee said yes to the Xa21 GM rice, but it was not approved by the government," said Lu Baorong, professor at Fudan University in Shanghai, one of the 74 members of the new committee, who was also a member of the previous committee.

"The safety requirement is getting tougher and tougher because of the concerns ... Because rice is for food, the government really wants to make sure that they make no mistake," said the deputy director for Institute of Biodiversity Science.

Other rice varieties, which are at the advanced stage of field study, include the insect resistant rice that contains a toxic bacterial gene, the insect resistant CpTI rice with a gene from cowpea and the Bt/CpTI rice that contains both genes.

## ILLEGAL RICE

The scientists and activists said Beijing was caught off guard in

April when Greenpeace announced that the unapproved GMO rice was on sale in the markets in the central province of Hubei, one of China's major rice producers.

Greenpeace also found illegal sale of the rice in the southern province of Guangdong in June, which it said showed the transgenic rice was spreading across China and could enter markets overseas.

Some of China's top trading partners, including the European Union, Japan and South Korea, expressed concern about the reports and they asked Beijing for clarification. At home, it led Guangdong to suspend rice purchases from Hubei.

"Our view is still the technology offers great potential," said Ren Wang, a Chinese scientist at International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines.

"However, these countries really need to put in place a biosafety regulatory scheme that ensures proper use of the technology. No transgenic rice should be allowed into commercial production before approval."

Now Japan tests rice and rice products from China to prevent transgenic rice from entering the country as consumers are not convinced of its safety.

Though China no longer belongs to the world's top five rice exporters, it sells rice and rice products, including organic rice, to Japan, South Korea and Africa.

Ironically, China just ratified a United Nation's protocol pledging more transparency and control over trade in GMO products.

"Domestic trade is also an issue," said Wang of the international rice institute. "There are different views towards transgenic rice and different controlling mechanisms in different provinces."

Sze Pangcheung from Greenpeace, agreed: "If you know you have a regulatory gap and you do have market concerns ... you should do something before you make the decision for commercialisation. Because once you make that, there's no way to turn back," he said.

(Additional reporting by Niu Shuping in Beijing)

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